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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1982
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2553
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2891
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001233

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, IIP

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GRAY/MANN VISIT EXTENDS ACCURATE STATE
MEDIA COVERAGE

REF: Ashgabat 1211

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following DAS Krol's successful visit and media coverage (reftel), state media favorably covered Energy Envoys C. Boyden Gray and Steven Mann's September 7-8 visit to Turkmenistan, their meeting with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, as well as their press conference in the Embassy's Public Affairs Section. International, and in particular, Russian media gave overall accurate coverage on the visit based mostly on state media reports. Unexpectedly, state media also interviewed Special Envoy Gray during his visit to Baku. Press attendance at the Embassy-organized press conference demonstrated a continued growing comfort level of interaction between state and non-state media. END SUMMARY.

STATE MEDIA HIGHLIGHT SPECIAL ENVOY C. BOYDEN GRAY AND AMBASSADOR STEVEN MANN'S VISIT

3. (U) September 7 "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) gave a short introduction of the visit's expected meetings with the government. Similar reports on September 8 appeared on the front pages of the state-run dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 44,791) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 33,391).

4. (U) On September 8, the "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) led with Gray and Mann's meeting with the president of Turkmenistan focusing on U.S. cooperation in energy. The coverage focused on Turkmenistan's role in ensuring global energy security, as well as U.S. readiness to assist in realizing large-scale energy and export projects. The story accurately carried Gray's remarks following the meeting, in particular the issues of export and pipeline diversification. The same day, "Turkmenistan" TV channel (Russian, Turkmen, English, Chinese, Arabian, Persian, and French) ran a short, accurate news story on the meeting with video excerpts. The following day, similar stories appeared on the front pages of state-run dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 44,791) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 33,391), and were posted on government website "Turkmenistan Golden Age" (Turkmen, Russian, English) and on Russia-based pro-government website "Turkmenistan.ru" (Russian, English). Also this report appeared on the front page of state newspaper "Watan" (Turkmen, circ. 30,091) on

September 11.

¶5. (SBU) In a surprise to post, on September 10, the "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) carried a special report on the International forum "Oil and Gas Potential of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan: Energy, Economy, Ecology, Partnership Strategy" that was held in Baku, Azerbaijan on September 9-10. Within this forum, the broadcast accurately carried Special Envoy Gray's interview remarks in which he praised recent cooperation between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in energy. (NOTE: State media's international coverage is usually limited to presidential visits abroad or "soft" news items borrowed from other media outlets. President Berdimuhamedov did not attend. END NOTE.)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENERGY ENVOYS' VISIT

¶6. (U) September 8 "RIA Novosti" (Russian) and "Moscow Interfax" (English) stories accurately covered the envoys' meeting with the president of Turkmenistan. The articles mainly emphasized U.S. willingness to assist Turkmenistan to develop major energy projects. The following day, News Central Asia (NCA) posted an article which linked the Gray and Mann visit to the Russia-Georgia clash, stating that the crisis urged U.S. to send envoys to Turkmenistan for energy resources. The "Journal of Turkish Weekly" (Turkish) carried the same article. On September 10, "Today's Zaman" (Turkish) posted an article on the visit, emphasizing Turkmenistan's willingness to cooperate with U.S. energy companies. September 10 and 11 Russian news agencies "Ejednevnye novosti khimicheskikh predpriyatiy SNG" and "Ejednevnye novosti "Energetika i energoresursy Ukrainy i SNG" articles accurately highlighted the visit and stressed the importance of diversifying Turkmen energy export routes. On

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September 12, Turkish newspaper "Zaman-International's" Turkmenistan edition (Turkmen, circ. 36,000 - and semi-independent of state media) ran a front-page article on Gray and Mann's meetings with government officials. (NOTE: Russian news agencies' articles were mainly drawn from state media coverage. END NOTE.)

PRESS-CONFERENCE WITH ENERGY ENVOYS DRAWS RECORD ATTENDANCE

¶7. (SBU) Post was pleased to see that state and non-state media again attended a press conference organized in the Public Affairs Section with four to five times more media reps than would have attended such an event two years ago. State media filmed the gathered journalists asking questions and taking notes, including the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent. The delayed beginning of the press conference (due to the preceding government meeting) allowed the various media reps to mingle. A representative of Turkmen State Press Service (TDH by its Russian acronym) talked with an unaccredited free-lancer and representative of Ukraininform.

The TDH rep asked a question during the press conference which represents only the second question from state media in the history of post's press conference. (NOTE: The same TDH rep sat quietly through DAS Krol's press conference just a few days before. END NOTE)

¶8. (U) On September 8, "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen), following the report about the meeting with Turkmenistan's president, and gave accurate coverage of the press-conference with Gray and Mann, which was held in the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy. Video excerpts showed scenes from the press event and the story focused on Gray's discussion of the issues covered during the presidential meeting.

¶9. (U) Turkish newspaper "Zaman-International" Turkmenistan's September 12 edition (Turkmen, circ. 36,000 - and semi-independent of state media) ran a front-page article on the event. The article carried a fairly short report about the press event but also drew heavily on the post-issued press release.

¶10. (U) On September 14, "Turkmenistan" TV channel (Russian, Turkmen, English, Chinese, Arabian, Persian, and French) gave accurate and broad coverage of the press event within its weekly political program. The broadcast first highlighted the meeting with President Berdimuhamedov, then it fully carried Gray's opening

statement in front of the press and accurately summarized many of his other responses to questions.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Overall coverage of the Gray and Mann visit was accurate and provided a positive image of U.S. engagement with Turkmenistan in the energy sector. With the exception of the NCA web posting, which is not widely read, international media did not misinterpret the meaning of the Special Energy Envoys' visit. Post believes that the significant press outreach during the visit contributed to accurate local and international coverage. Although Turkmen state media's direct coverage of the conference in Baku may seem to be insignificant, it does represent a significant step away from the exclusive focus on the president's travel abroad as the only foreign news.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Perhaps more significant however, is the growing normalcy of press conferences. The U.S. Embassy is the only Ashgabat organizer of regular press conferences. The practice is starting to develop an expectation that U.S. visitors will answer journalists' questions - in contrast to Turkmen government officials or other foreign visitors. It is also contributing to state media's level of comfort with routine practices in a Western media environment. "Turkmenistan" channel's coverage of the press conference included footage of the RFE/RL reporter asking questions along with other journalists. While a small step, this hopefully demonstrates a growing comfort with the presence of non-state and even critical news outlets. END COMMENT.

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